A Pilot study of the educational achievement of Chinese students in Flanders. Parents’ and students’ perspectives. Comparisons with previous research among Moroccan students.

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Introduction

In the Flemish educational system a huge gap exists between its best and the worst performing students. The last group consists mainly of children of immigrant origin. Although the last decades all kinds of measures were introduced to combat this problem, children of immigrants continue to perform worse than their Flemish counterparts. Important differences exist between various groups. The performance of North-African students for example is significantly lower than that of other groups (Duquet et. al. 2006). In many Western countries Chinese students are found to attain very high academic achievement (Francis & Archer 2005). This situation was the starting point for a large collaborative research project our research unit is participating in (University of Antwerp 2010). Four university departments (The Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS), University of Antwerp, (initiator and leader of the project), The Centre for Diversity and Learning (SDL), University of Ghent, The Higher Institute for Labour Studies (HIVA) and the Centre for Interculturalism, Migration and Minority Research (IMMRC) of the Catholic University of Leuven) are working together focussing on youngsters Moroccan, Turkish, Polish and Chinese origin.

More specifically our unit is interested in the community forces that influence minority school adjustment and performance such as the trust parents have in the society and in the school system in particular, issues of identity, beliefs in the instrumental value of education, the parent’s educational strategies, as well as influences of peer groups and youth culture (Ogbu & Simons 1998, Ogbu 2003, Hermans 2002, 2004).

In this paper we will focus on the perception of Chinese and Moroccan students and their parents on the various elements contributing to or impedying their educational performance. We hope that a comparison of the two groups will help us to discover variables that might explain the differences in academic success between different minority groups.

Chinese and Moroccan immigration to Belgium

In the 1960’s many West European countries opened up their borders because of their need for a cheap labour force. At first Belgium recruited immigrants from southern Europe, thereafter Morocco and Turkey became important suppliers of unskilled labourers.

Chinese immigrants started arriving in Belgium at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most came on their own initiative from Canton between 1950 and 1980. Since then another flow of migrants from different parts of mainland China has been coming through. The Chinese have been researched less than other immigrant groups. They are often designated as the ‘invisible minority’ and have remained at the periphery in the official and
unofficial discourse (Pang 2003). They form a relatively small group (about 50,000) in comparison to other minorities in Belgium and most first generation Chinese are small and independent entrepreneurs who are not competing for jobs in the labour market.

The first Moroccans were recruited but this soon resulted in a massive spontaneous immigration process. The first generation of Moroccans was mainly of rural origin; many were Berbers from the north of Morocco, and only a few had received some formal education. They were employed as unskilled workers. For a long time, Moroccan guest workers were seen as a temporary phenomenon which meant that their integration was not a main concern. In the mean time Moroccans have become the largest immigrant group in Belgium (estimated at more than 280,000). Moroccans have received a lot of attention in the social science literature since they are seen as problematic and maladjusted and because their children are not performing well in school (Hermans 2006).

Immigration to Belgium is no longer authorized for citizens who do not belong to a member state of the European Community. The main exception concerns persons who marry someone who already lives legally in Belgium. In this country immigrants have never been selected as is the case in Canada or the United States.

Methodology

Between May and September 2009 Sarah Braeye conducted semi-structured interviews with ten Chinese second-generation youngsters (six girls and four boys) between fifteen and nineteen years old as well as with their parents. Eight of them followed general secondary education, one boy followed technical education, another one vocational training. All of them also attended Chinese language classes in the Chinese school of Antwerp or Ghent. The students were selected in this school on the basis of different variables thereby striving for a representative sample that reflects the broader group of Chinese pupils in Flemish society. In general the majority of Chinese adolescents can be found within the general secondary education track. As a result most of the students interviewed came from this track. This is a pilot study and we are fully aware that our data are limited and they are of a preliminary nature. However to gain insight into the differences between successful and unsuccessful minorities we found it interesting to compare these results with research done earlier on Moroccan students in Brussels by Philip Hermans. In the late 1980s he studied and compared two groups of 20 year old Moroccan male students. The first group (group A, N=19) consisted of boys who had completed their general secondary education with success which was quite exceptional at the time. The boys of the second group (group B, N=23) had a very troubled school career and did not possess a diploma. In a second project in the late 1990s Hermans interviewed Moroccan parents about their experiences of educating their children in Belgium and their perception of the Flemish school system. (Hermans 1994, 1995, 2004, 2006).

Chinese students’ perceptions of factors influencing their academic performance

Eight out of ten Chinese students were of opinion that they were doing well in school and nine students considered being educationally successful as very important. The most quoted reason for their perceived success was that it provided them with a diploma which would enable them to choose an interesting job. Four girls stated that studying well was a necessary condition to be independent and to have a better understanding of the world. All
Chinese students believed that getting good or bad grades was in the first place due to their own efforts. Cultural differences were not offered as possible causes for failure. Chinese youngsters considered education important not only for their personal goals but also because their parents placed a high value on good school results.

As most parents worked during the evenings in the catering industry and didn’t speak fluent Dutch, they were not able to offer much help with their homework. However, when it became clear that their children had problems at school, most parents went looking for private teachers. Many parents asked teachers for additional exercises even if their children did well. According to the students, their parents stimulated them in various ways. They discussed their studies and controlled how they spent their time and who they frequented. Many students even revealed their parents had made financial sacrifices in order to create optimal study conditions.

All Chinese students felt they could choose their studies freely, but they knew that once they had made their choice their parents expected them to persevere. Very often strict and elite schools were selected and these were mostly schools with a very low immigrant student population. Apart from attendance to parent’s evenings, Chinese parents did not have much contact with the schools of their children. They ‘did not want to interfere with schools’ policies.

Moroccan students

All the Moroccan boys, the successful ones as well as the unsuccessful ones, attributed their bad or good school results in the first place to themselves. The boys of group A mentioned their own efforts and hard work as the main reason for their success, those of group B blamed their failure on their lack of interest. Surprisingly the boys never spoke about language and/or cultural differences as possible reasons for their failure. A few boys mentioned the negative influence of their peers, but this was never seen as the first and most important cause. Studying well was not considered by these Moroccan youngsters as a duty or obligation to their parents or their community.

The boys of group A were of the opinion that the stimulation and control by their parents had also been of major importance. In the same sense almost all the boys of group A attributed the failure of so many migrant boys to the fact they were not followed enough at home.

The boys of group A as well as group B did not receive much help from their parents with their schoolwork. Most Moroccan parents had not followed secondary education. Nevertheless interesting differences arose between the two groups. Many boys of group A remarked that although their parents could not offer much concrete help, they did show much interest in their studies and sought for help elsewhere when necessary. Most boys of group A received considerable stimulation and encouragement from their parents. Parents chose the school for their children carefully and gave them everything they needed for study purposes. Within the ‘A-families’ fathers controlled the time and the movements of their children.

The boys of group B displayed a completely different image. The extensive reports about stimulation and control were absent in the stories of the boys. A lot of them got the impression that their parents had other priorities and did not act in a consequent
way: although they verbally stated that studying was important, they did not create the necessary conditions to make it possible.

**Chinese parents’ perception of the Flemish educational system**

The Chinese are often perceived as a ‘model minority’ as they are economically and academically successful. Consequently Chinese migrants are not perceived as a ‘threat’ to Belgian society, though at the same moment a label of being ‘closed’ and not approachable’ is stuck on them. Questions should thus be asked about how this affects the ways that Chinese parents relate to Belgian society and its educational institutions and how in return specific Belgian-Chinese constructions of identity are shaped by the parents and their children. None of the Chinese parents interviewed felt they were being discriminated against. They were strikingly laudatory about the way they were treated by Belgians in general and by the school staff in particular. Many Chinese parents believed that Belgians liked them more than other foreigners because they worked hard, did not create trouble, did not ask for financial support and raised polite children.

Chinese immigrants seemed do their best to adjust to the challenges of acculturation but simultaneously retained a strong Chinese identity. All Chinese parents uttered the importance to maintain specific Chinese cultural customs and their native language. They spoke Chinese with their children and sent them to Chinese language schools. Nevertheless they equally emphasized the importance of Dutch and said that the maintenance of Chinese should not inhibit the integration of their children in the society. Many Chinese parents felt they had no choice but to remain in the catering business for reasons of education, language and even discrimination. However they did not pass this message on their children, as they believed that their children would have more opportunities if they studied hard enough. The Chinese pupils’ testimonies equally reflected this positive message. Work ethic and perseverance were believed to lead to fair job opportunities.

**Moroccan parents’ perception of the Flemish educational system**

On the one hand, many Moroccan parents believed that their children received a decent education in Belgian schools and that they acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to participate in society. On the other hand, sooner or later most parents, even those that otherwise spoke out positively, voiced a lot of discontent about Belgian schools and society.

First, many Moroccan parents believed their upbringing methods were much better than the Belgian ones. Very important to the parents were the notions of respect, morality and Islam. Belgian schools and society gave children too much freedom and did not value Islam or its values and traditions. Children were encouraged to have their own opinions and to question everything too much, even the certainties they were taught at home. Many parents feared that their children would lose their Moroccan identity, values, language and customs. Because of such experiences, some Moroccan parents became convinced that schools had a hidden agenda: in the name of integration, their children had to distance themselves from their culture and to loosen the links with their parents.

Furthermore, parents had the impression that teachers were not interested in their children and were not trained to teach them. They found that prejudices and paternalism prevailed when children presented problems at school.
It seemed that the parents were very aware of the negative way in which they were represented in the discourses of the majority. Their statements could at least partly be interpreted as counternarratives by which they affirmed themselves against the dominant discourses of the society they live in. A representation of Western culture is formulated that is probably just as stereotypical as the Western one of Moroccan culture.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discover some of the factors that might explain the differences in academic achievement between Chinese and Moroccan students. Important differences seem to exist between the two groups. We will limit ourselves to the following considerations that need further research.

Both groups see education as necessary and important but they prioritise it to different extents. The Chinese parental strategies seem to be more consequent than the Moroccan ones. It is striking that the Moroccan parents whose children were successful in school used strategies that resembled those of the Chinese parents in general. Traditional Chinese culture and especially its attitudes towards social mobility, education and upbringing seem to be more favourable to academic success in Western schools than traditional Moroccan culture.

The Chinese and Moroccans have developed very different attitudes toward the Flemish society. The Chinese feel not much discrimination or ignore it whereas the Moroccans interpret their relationships with schools and teachers within the context of a lasting conflict between themselves and the dominant society. They are suspicious of the intentions of the school curriculum and perceive their identity, religion and culture as oppositional. Many doubt the value of pursuing higher studies because they perceive little evidence that good academic performance rewards them with good jobs. The educational strategies of many Moroccan parents seem to be overshadowed by feelings of distrust and alienation. These can hardly but influence the academic achievements of their children negatively. There appears to be a great need to build trust between the Moroccan community and the dominant society (Ogbu & Simons 1998, Ogbu 2003, Hermans 2004).

Bibliography


